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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The objective of this study was to investigate the fit between Inuit conceptions of effective helping and Western counselling.

Study Design/Methods: The essential components and value foundations of effective Western counselling, including multicultural counselling, were identified from primary and secondary counselling texts. Inuit traditional values and helping practices were identified from the transcripts of interviews with Inuit elders. Interviews with 5 younger Inuit provided information about the counselling needs of contemporary Inuit. Grounded theory analysis of all texts and interview transcripts was used to determine each informant group's conceptions of the elements of effective counselling. A comparative chart was then constructed of the important relationship factors, strategies and process, and effective interventions identified by each informant group.

Results: The values and relationship factors of effective counselling are similar in traditional and Western helping, and these same factors are important to the contemporary Inuit interviewed. Affective, behavioural and cognitive interventions were used traditionally; modern generic counselling also uses a variety of strategies from these three primary categories. Cognitive and cognitive-behavioural approaches to problem-solving were traditionally of primary importance, with expression of feelings also seen as essential.

Conclusion: Western and traditional Inuit helping correspond, and cognitive/cognitive-behavioural approaches especially complement Inuit cultural practice.

INTRODUCTION

This research was the result of a decade's experience as a non-Inuit counsellor and counsellor-educator with Inuit students in Nunavut. In the professional literature and in conversations with researchers and others interested in counselling, the political, professional and popular perceptions were generally that culturally-specific strategies are necessary for effective counselling, and that the helping strategies of Inuit and other indigenous cultures and Western-based counselling are different in fundamental ways and therefore incompatible (1-6). Inuit also wish to retain the best of the old and learn the best of the new (7). There did not, however, seem to be empirical research that investigated the similarity or dissimilarity of Inuit values and helping behaviours and those of contemporary counselling. Neither was there an organized body of knowledge about Inuit traditional values and strategies related to helping.

Thus it was difficult to know what specific traditional strategies were; nor was it possible to know which modern counselling practices are suitable or unsuitable in working with Inuit who wish to retain some degree of traditional practice in helping situations. Assumptions in either direction can result in inappropriate and unhelpful practice.

Conclusions about appropriateness and incompatibility could only be drawn from an empirical, evidence-based comparison. It was therefore necessary to identify the practices and values of both modern counselling and traditional Inuit helping, in order to assess their relationship.

A counselling framework grows out of worldview and beliefs about human nature and behaviour (8). Western counselling values have been identified and codified (9-11); it thus seemed necessary to identify both the worldview and values that informed traditional Inuit helping, and the practices that arose from that foundation.

Multicultural counselling is perceived as different from conventional models; it was therefore also necessary to identify the elements of multicultural counselling in order to determine strategies that could conceivably be more appropriate to Inuit-sensitive practice.

Finally, information from contemporary Inuit was necessary, as ideas and needs change between generations.

METHODOLOGY

Informants

Texts were used as “informants” regarding Western counselling. The works of a number of primary counselling theorists (12-22) were examined to identify the foundational values and strategies on which Western counselling is based. Texts and articles related to contemporary practice models, counsellor training, and multicultural process were also analysed (23-28¹).

Information about traditional worldview, beliefs about human behaviour, and helping values and practices was obtained from transcripts of interviews conducted with twenty-six elders in 1997-1999. The interviews had been conducted by Language and Culture students at Nunavut Arctic College, Iqaluit, for a series of books on traditional

¹ Many more texts were examined. The references noted are a representative sampling.

knowledge (29-34). Although traditional counselling was not a specific focus of any of these interviews, the unedited transcripts were a rich source of information relevant to this study.

Five contemporary Inuit in their 30s and 40s (four female, one male), with experience of counselling as clients and/or counsellors, were interviewed. This age group has experience of both traditional and modern life; their viewpoints were therefore considered especially relevant to an investigation of cultural appropriateness. Their involvement in counselling situations would have produced experience-based ideas about helpful/appropriate and unhelpful/inappropriate practices. Interviews were conducted individually, in a semi structured format: general questions about experience and opinions had been developed, but each interview flowed in idiosyncratic directions.

Analysis

Grounded theory was used to generate core categories of counselling essentials as identified by each group of informants. A model of effective counselling, including counsellor and relationship qualities and values, process, and interventions was thus constructed for each of the three groups (Western counselling, traditional Inuit, contemporary Inuit). The elements of these three models were then compared.

RESULTS

The relationship qualities of warmth, caring, non-judgmental acceptance, and trust in both confidentiality and belief in the counsellor's ability to help are common to elders

and contemporary Inuit views of good counselling; these are also essential elements of generic Western counselling.

Value commonalities include belief in and acceptance of differences among individuals, attention to and respect for individual context, belief in client ability/need to take responsibility for change, and acceptance of client choice. All believe in the interrelatedness of affect, behaviour, thought and physiological reactions.

Common process strategies include gathering sufficient information, listening well and with understanding, helping the individual reflect and gain insight, helping in decision-making and goal-setting, and providing options and ideas for client consideration.

Western and Inuit (traditional and contemporary) interventions involve affective, behavioural and cognitive approaches. Inuit were future-oriented and problem-solving oriented, and thinking/analysing/reasoning and cognitive strategies were of primary importance traditionally. Thinking things through, 'making sense,' continues to be an important factor among younger Inuit as well. Modern counselling has developed a wide range of cognitive & cognitive-behavioural interventions, and research shows such approaches to be effective in a wide variety of problem-solving. Expression of feelings was seen as especially critical by the elders in resolution of personal and interpersonal problems. (Younger Inuit generally noted that such expression should, however, not be forced, simply enabled.) Positive self-esteem was also seen as a factor in happy, productive life. Western affective interventions involving exploration of feelings and strategies for developing self-esteem thus seem appropriate, and healing groups oriented

to ‘talk therapy’ are in fact already ongoing in Inuit communities and perceived as very helpful. Traditional learning of behaviour depended on observation and practice, so Western behavioural strategies of role-modelling and practice of new skills are highly applicable. Calm, explicit communication was also traditionally seen as important: behavioural training in interpersonal communication skills thus seems appropriate and useful depending on client needs.

Appropriate self-disclosure is a strategy for relationship-building and for demonstrating understanding. It is an element that seemed especially important for the younger informants, for establishing a sense of being understood. Its use was not as explicitly discussed in the elders’ interviews, but is noted or implied in discussions of understanding and advice, wherein people speak of feeling most comfortable with someone who understands what they are going through. Western counselling also views self-disclosure as a useful tool in certain circumstances, and has developed properties and dimensions of appropriateness in such disclosure.

The contemporary model of generic counselling emphasizes an eclectic and/or integrative approach to interventions: strategies must suit the context, needs and personality of the client. Resourcefulness and innovation were hallmarks of life in the past; Inuit have always looked for and adapted new ideas and strategies to solve problems and make life better. An eclectic approach to intervention thus seems to fit quite naturally into Inuit traditions: If one method does not work, it is important to seek other possible solutions.

There is, however, a significant difference between life then and now. In groups of fewer than ten to perhaps thirty people, one’s group life was also one’s personal life –

family, friends, work, education. Then, as now, choices were made within the personal context, but then, there was no other. And inevitably, the helpers were one's parents, relatives, friends. Contemporary counselling draws boundaries between the personal and the working relationships, intended to make it more possible for the counsellor to keep the client's needs foremost. Younger Inuit especially placed strong emphasis on the need for unpressured personal decision-making, so the neutrality of modern counselling may be a beneficial factor.

That considered, nothing in the process and strategies of traditional counselling seems inappropriate for counselling with younger Inuit – or with non-Inuit for that matter; and nothing in the generic Western counselling model seems inappropriate for either. But in each counselling situation, the counsellor must be alert to differences between herself and the client, must determine how these differences shape the client's perceptions, and must then adjust strategies to fit the client. Elders emphasized differences among Inuit groups and among individuals: Inuit culture was/is neither static nor homogeneous, and Inuit individuals did not and do not have identical contexts, behaviours, goals, emotions, etc. The effective counsellor, whether Inuit or non-Inuit, must therefore develop a clear understanding of the client's place *within* his/her culture. In other words, the counsellor must be client-centred.

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